



MUMBAI

# American Center ★★★★★ Bulletin

MARCH

2006

## LANGUAGE, SEX AND GENDER

BY RUTH BENNETT

A father and his son are on the way home from a football game, when they get into a car accident. They are both rushed to the hospital. The father dies en route, but the son is taken to the operating room. The surgeon comes in and says, "I can't operate on this boy. He's my son." How is this possible?

If the answer doesn't come to you immediately, it will likely do so in the next few paragraphs. But I'll return to it – and why we should care – later in the essay.

"Non-sexist" language, or nongendered language, is a wave that has already broken over the shores of the United States. Nearly all commonly-accepted grammar guides in the U.S., from those intended for first-year college students to those produced for news anchors and journalists, discourage the use of male pronouns to refer to men and women (the "generic masculine"), the marking of women's marital status ("Miss" or "Mrs.," as opposed to "Ms.") and the suffix "-man." Influential etiquette expert Judith Martin – "Miss Manners" – has embraced the social title "Ms." as appropriate in polite society (in principle, if not in practice), and even conservative columnist and language authority William Safire has reluctantly acceded to the tide of popular opinion.

Many linguists resist the encroachment of ideology into language. They point to the poor knowledge of etymology present in some feminist arguments: the word "female," for example, does not come from "male" plus a prefix, but derives from the Latin "femella," an entirely unrelated word. Even the word "man" itself originally meant "someone" in Middle English, a meaning preserved intact in modern German. Moreover, feminists ought not to be mollified with the substitution of "human being," derived from "homo," a grammatically male word in Latin.

Their arguments continue in the realm of usage. If the word "man," for example, subsumes both men and women in common usage, it is only because linguistic female gender is more "marked" than the male. Philosophers such as Kelley Ross, Los Angeles Valley College, argue that to be marked is not to be less valuable: "If there were a parking lot full of Cadillacs," she writes in an on-line philosophy forum, "they would usually be called 'Cadillacs,' whereas if the lot were full of either Cadillacs and non-Cadillacs, or vehicles which were all non-Cadillacs, they would simply be called 'automobiles.'" This usage, she continues, does not imply that Cadillacs are less valued than other

cars, and is even consistent with the notion that they are more valued – special, and set apart – than other vehicles.

I've sketched the linguists' arguments with some sympathy, because I find their position quite logical and internally consistent – when it comes to language. The fundamental flaw that reduces most of their objections to irrelevance, however is this: *gender is not sex* – neither in grammar, nor any other sphere.

As anyone knows who has tried to learn French and puzzled over what secondary sexual characteristics a book is supposed to have – not a story, but *le livre*, the actual printed (and in French, male) page – grammatical gender is a wholly arbitrary system of marking, not a way of dividing the real world into "male" things and "female" ones. Books are not male, and knowing that the word "homo" is masculine doesn't alter the way we comprehend its derivative, "human." One could as easily learn a language system as having "blue" nouns and verb endings versus "red" ones. Similarly, some – though by no means all – feminists claim that gender in the social world is almost equally arbitrary. In their view (and in the interests of fairness and accuracy, I disclose: *my* view), "gender" refers to the social construction of the biological sexes: what roles and attributes men and women are *supposed* to take on. This may or may not have anything to do with biological sex. When we say "women bear children," for example, we are talking about a (rare!) convergence of biological sex and gender. When we say "women raise children," we are talking about gender, not necessarily biological sex.

The argument, then, in its basic form, is that because we are creatures fantastically sensitive to word meaning, by gendering our language – in arbitrary ways – we end up forcing (or reinforcing) gender divisions in the social world, and mistakenly conclude this has something to do with biological sex. In order to support this argument link by link, let me start with the first part – the meaning of words affects us at our core – and introduce the linguists Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf, and their famous hypothesis.

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis holds that the language one speaks determines one's thinking about the world. Take the color spectrum, for example: right at the point where yellow becomes orange (or blue becomes green, etc.), a person might experience the color as either "yellow" or "orange." Which one they perceive will

(Continued on page 2)


**The American Center**  
4 New Marine Lines, Mumbai 400 020  
Tel: 2262-4590; Fax: 2262-4595  
E-mail: [MumbaiPublicAffairs@state.gov](mailto:MumbaiPublicAffairs@state.gov)  
Website: <http://mumbai.usconsulate.gov>  
Office Hours: 8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.  
(Monday through Friday)

**HOLIDAYS**  
**March 15: Holi**  
**March 30: Gudi Padwa**



First of all, let me thank all of you who have written or e-mailed us with comments on Deputy Director Ruth Bennett's essay in the January 2006 edition of this bulletin. We enjoyed and appreciated your thoughtful and sometimes provocative replies regarding globalization and culture, and your enthusiasm for such a dialogue encouraged us to continue along the same lines for March, which Americans observe as Women's History Month.

With that intent, and keeping in mind the fact that how ideas are talked about can matter virtually as much as the ideas themselves, we offer what I hope you'll agree is an equally interesting essay, also by Ruth Bennett, on the subject of "Language, Sex and Gender," and we again welcome your reaction to the premise that how women are talked about makes an enormous difference to their – our – ability to be fully empowered economically and socially for the ultimate benefit of society as a whole, whether in India or the U.S. Women need to be truly heard, not just on International Women's Day, March 8, but every day, and thinking about language and gender is one way to open our ears.

  
Linda C. Cheatham  
Director

*(Continued from page 1)*

have a lot to do with how the word "yellow" is used in their language. Native American speakers of the Zuni dialect, despite being able to physically perceive all wavelengths of light, have one word that covers the entire orange-yellow spectrum, and find it more difficult to differentiate between orange and yellow objects than do English speakers. Like most good scientific theories, Sapir-Whorf is extremely simple. Words have meanings; brains think in languages. When children learn language, in a real sense they are learning how to think, and they also accept the meanings that particular language has assigned to those words – otherwise the child would be unable to communicate in his or her culture.

Although the original Whorfian hypothesis has been criticized as being too strong (lots of things other than language affect thought, the criticism goes), the weaker version, that language mediates thought, including memory and associations, is widely accepted. Social psychologists, who study thought almost entirely through the medium of language, know that language frames thought in quantifiable and predictable ways. Studies have shown that people who are told a piece of meat is 80 percent lean will describe it as significantly healthier than will people told the same meat is 20 percent fat. Drivers will happily pay \$2 per gallon for gas with their credit card even when a 5-cent per gallon discount for cash payment is offered, but will complain vigorously if trying to use their credit card at a gas station charging \$1.95 per gallon with a 5-cent per gallon surcharge for paying by card. Again, the message is simple and intuitive: words have meaning; supply the right words, and you can influence thought and behavior.

For the sake of argument, let's say you're on board with the story so far: people don't attend to the etymology of a word; they cotton on to its meaning and attend to it automatically; if you manipulate language, you're also pulling the strings of thought, which can lead to changes in behavior in predictable ways. On to the next part of the argument: how does this distort gender upon the social world – and, while we're at it, why is that to the detriment of girls? After all, the linguist has argued, we use the word

## How Can Gendered Language Be Avoided?

Easy. If you *mean* "he or she," say "he or she."

If you find that clumsy, have another look at this essay: it's written in non-sexist language. "He or she" is used only once.

- Terms like "news anchor" replace "anchorman" and "first-year" replace "freshman" (third paragraph).
- Plurals are used where possible. ("When children learn...they" rather than "When a child learns...he"). In one instance, this is technically ungrammatical: ("...telling a friend, without telling them"). Most current grammar guides now accept this as the lesser of two evils. As usage changes, so does our ear for such things. Did you notice it? (Fifth paragraph from the end.)

Not used here, but another technique is to alter your examples: use a "generic feminine" on one page, and a "generic masculine" on another. Better yet, why not practice language affirmative action? Try "the nurse, he..." and "the surgeon, she..."...

"Cadillac" only as a special marker for a certain kind of car, and "automobile" otherwise. Why wouldn't a girl glean from hearing the generic masculine used that she's special?

By way of the first tranche of the answer, let me first point out how odd it is that our languages mark for gender and not, generally, other ways to divide humanity, such as by race, religion, or age. The immensely talented writer Douglas Hofstadter devoted an entire satirical essay to musing on this very point. He did it by swapping "black" and "white" for "woman" and "man" and invented new pronouns for each race and a host of other ingenious tricks. In 20 years of talking to people about this subject, I've found his essay to be the single most effective tool for changing minds, capable of wresting instant conversions from diehard opponents. Here's just a taste; I urge you to read the full brilliant piece on-line (see box, page four):

"For years, Niss Moses, author of the well-known negritracts A Handbook of Nonracist Writing and Words and Blacks, has had nothing better to do than go around the country making speeches advocating the downfall of 'racist language' that ble objects to. But when you analyze bler objections, you find they all fall apart at the seams. Niss Moses says that words like 'chairwhite' suggest to people – most especially impressionable young whiteys and blackeys – that all chairwhites belong to the white race. How absurd! It's quite obvious, for instance, that the chairwhite of the League of Black Voters is going to be a black, not a white. Nobody need think twice about it. ...

"In fact, Niss Moses sees evidence of racism under every stone. Ble has written a famous article, in which ble vehemently objects to the immortal and poetic words of the first white on the moon, Captain Nellie Strongarm. If you will recall, whis words were: 'One small step for a white, a giant step for whitekind'. This noble sentiment is anything but racist; it is simply a celebration of a glorious moment in the history of White."

*(Continued on page 3)*



(Continued from page 2)

Would blacks think themselves "special" because they are "marked"? Intuitively, I think, we can see they would not. People are not Cadillacs. Sometimes a simple thought experiment can save miles of rhetoric.

Now for the second tranche. Why can a French child say (in French) "the book, he is on the table" without imputing biological maleness to the book, and not "the doctor, he is here" without the same results? Easy: the answer's in the question. One's biological, the other's not. Most people don't process information about inanimate objects in the same way they do information about other people. Neither do you. Let's return to the riddle I began with. Doubtlessly, you've concluded that the surgeon can't operate on the boy because she's his mother. If that was blindingly and instantly obvious to you, congratulations. Now try telling a friend, *without* telling them first that this has something to do, generally, with the topic "Language, sex and gender." Didn't get it at first? You're in good company. Our brains are marvelous things, but one thing they can't do is effortlessly picture an androgynous being to occupy the grammatical slot of third person singular (he/she/it). Mentally, we can manage "he" and "she." We don't cope with "it" nearly so well.

Much psychological research has shown that students who read stories about, say, mailmen mentally picture – guess what? – men. Students who are asked to complete sentences such as "a person is having a bad day when he..." versus "one is having a bad day when one..." and asked about their own mental imagery (e.g. "what's the name of the person you thought about when finishing that sentence?") offered significantly more men's names in the first instance. And women who read about psychologists identified only by masculine pronouns rated psychology as a less attractive career option.

It's bad enough that repeated use of "the surgeon, he..." (and its flip side, "the nurse, she...") can muddle the sex/gender distinction enough to render us unable to answer a simple riddle, but to my mind, the last study mentioned above is the most frightening. Unlike books, people have self-images to contend with. To give a personal example, I recently bought a fancy journal to write in. The first few pages were filled with helpful preprinted information, such as metric conversion tables. Then I got to the "personal records" section, which prompted me to record things like my blood type. The first column prompted "Self?" Fair enough. The second column said "Wife?" What am I to conclude, other than that this journal wasn't intended for me? Especially when it would've been so easy to substitute the word "spouse"?

We're clue-seeking animals, and it starts early. Babies search out a parent's face when encountering something new, looking for a hint about how to react (the impulse is echoed in adults quietly sneaking a sidelong glance at a neighbor at a dinner party to figure out what on earth that third fork's for). Adolescents are famously insecure, even as adolescence is a time of trying things – not to mention ideas, people, and careers – on. If social cues abound that something is Not Intended For Me, they're painfully attuned to receive them. The result can be nothing less than internalized gender apartheid.

Globally speaking, we don't have the luxury to continue squandering half our human intellectual capital. What if the eventual cure for AIDS is currently a germ of a notion in the brain of a 12-year-old girl (which, statistically speaking, given world sex ratios, is marginally more likely than it being in the brain of a boy) who has just concluded medical school is not appropriate for the feminine gender? Any good linguist, psychologist or rational human being would have to treat it as a hypothesis, rather than a given, that inclusive language will erode stereotypes and more fully incorporate girls into the public sphere. But what experiment could be more absurdly easy to undertake, or offer such a high potential payoff at so little cost?

Ruth Bennett is Deputy Director of the American Center.

## NOTES FROM THE AIRC

### A Select Webliography on Women's History

<http://www.historians.org/governance/cwh/>

American Historical Association – Committee on Women Historians

<http://www.archives.gov/research/alic/reference/womens-history.html>

The National Archives – Archive Library Information Center – Women

<http://www.theccwh.org/>

Coordinating Council for Women in History, Inc.

<http://www.ed.gov/free/w-history.html>

Federal Resources for Educational Excellence – Women's History Month Resources

<http://www.ipl.org/djv/subject/browse/soc50.90.90/>

The Internet Public Library – Women

<http://lii.org/pub/subtopic/5477>

Librarians' Internet Index – Women

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/awhhtml/>

The Library of Congress – American Women – A Gateway to Library of Congress Resources for the Study of Women's History and Culture in the United States

<http://ncwhs.oah.org/>

National Collaborative for Women's History Sites

<http://www.firstladies.org/index.htm>

National First Ladies' Library

<http://www.cr.nps.gov/nr/feature/wom/index.htm>

National Park Service – Women's History Month Feature

<http://www.nmwh.org/home/home.html>

National Women's History Museum

<http://www.nwhp.org/>

National Women's History Project

<http://poynter.org/column.asp?id=49&aid=1142>

Poynteronline – Women's History Month

<http://womhist.binghamton.edu/>

Women and Social Movements in the United States, 1600-2000

<http://www.library.wisc.edu/libraries/WomensStudies/hist.htm>

University of Wisconsin Library – Women's History Resources

<http://www.wic.org/misc/history.htm>

Women's International Center – Women's History in America

<http://www.wwhp.org/>

Worcester Women's History Project

**Note:** Internet sites included in this listing, other than those of the U.S. Government, should not be construed as an endorsement of the views contained therein.

Ruth recommends:

Douglas Hofstadter's essay switching race and sex:

<http://www.cs.virginia.edu/~evans/cs655/readings/purity.html>

A brilliant tool that swaps genders in any English-language Internet page:

<http://regender.com>. Try it for a mind-bending experiment in bias!

Classic articles on how language frames thought:

Kahneman, D., & Tversky, A. (1979). Prospect theory: An analysis of decision under risk. *Econometrica*, 47, 263-291

Tversky, A., & Kahneman, D. (1981). The framing of decisions and the psychology of choice. *Science*, 211, 453-458

A few starting references on gender:

Bem, S.L. (1994). *The Lenses of Gender: Transforming the Debate on Sexual Inequality*. Yale University Press.

Hamilton, Mykol C. (1988). Using Masculine Generics: Does Generic He' Increase Male Bias in the User's Imagery? *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research*, 19, 785-799.

Mallett, R., Stangor, C., & Swim, J. K. (2004). Understanding Subtle Sexism: Detection and Use of Sexist Language. *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research*, 51, 117-128.

Classic style guide for nongendered language:

Miller, Casey, and Swift, Kate. *The Handbook of Nonsexist Writing*. New York: Barnes and Noble, Harper & Row, 1980.